Dignified public expression: A new logic of political accountability

Abstract:

Research on political accountability emphasizes elections and popular control, but often neglects how ordinary people hold their leaders to account in the context of daily life. Dominant scholarly approaches emphasize the logic of electoral sanctioning and removal, missing the importance of mutual respect between representatives and citizens. This article introduces a new logic of democratic accountability based on the social practices, daily political behaviors, and public deliberation between representatives and citizens. Using urban Ghana as a study site, this article uncovers the mechanisms through which a theory based on respect works in practice. By reconciling theories of political representation with deliberative democracy, the article places the voices of urban Ghanaians in conversation with Western political thought to broaden understandings of accountability in African democracies.


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Acknowledgements:

The Social Science Research Council and the National Science Foundation generously funded the research. Michael Schatzberg, Macartan Humphreys, Howard Schweber, Kristin McKie, and Nicholas Rush Smith provided great comments on earlier versions of the manuscript. Abubakar Addy, Alhassan Ibn Abdallah, Nii Addo Quaynor, Philip Kumah, and Innocent Adamadu Onyx provided excellent research assistance. Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi and the Ghana Center for Democratic Development served as great research hosts. All errors are my own.
Dignified public expression: A new logic of political accountability

How do citizens hold their representatives to account in African democracies? What are the mechanisms through which accountability “works”? These questions are surprisingly underexamined in the African politics literature. Most studies suggest that citizens hold their leaders to account at the ballot box through retrospective voting.¹ For elections to serve as sanctioning mechanisms, citizens must be able to attribute performance to political action,² have sufficient information about government performance,³ and turn people out to vote.⁴ There is some evidence that information campaigns can improve politicians’ performance, especially in competitive districts.⁵ But elections have also been shown to contribute to political clientelism.⁶ Part of the reason for this is that representatives face pressures that undermine accountability and promote clientelism due to the informal norms and duties attached to their leadership.⁷

This paper suggests that much of the existing literature ignores the actual ways that citizens hold their representatives to account outside of the electoral context.⁸ By doing so, they overlook the meanings that leaders and followers attach to the political process; the expectations citizens have of their leaders; and the incentives that representatives face in the struggle for political power. Instead, the political practices that extend beyond the ballot box necessitate a central place in theories of political accountability. This is because the daily practices between representatives and their constituents serve as important mechanisms through which accountability often works in practice. This approach follows in the tradition of comparative politics research that details how everyday life structures democratic development.⁹

Scholars have documented numerous strategies that citizens use to hold their leaders to account that extend beyond elections and the formal rule of law. In Chinese villages, community solidary groups hold politicians accountable through informal rules and norms that require
leaders to demonstrate a high moral standing in the community.\textsuperscript{10} In Senegal, urban residents use a discourse of moral piety in order to get their municipal government to collect trash and pay sanitation workers decent wages.\textsuperscript{11} In India, residents rely on a variety of formal and informal institutions and leaders, including NGOs, village councils, and political brokers, to serve as intermediaries and pressure the state for social services.\textsuperscript{12} In Argentina, residents of shantytowns form personal problem-solving networks with brokers and community leaders and use festivals and social events to demand public services.\textsuperscript{13} In Botswana, citizens join traditional public assemblies called \textit{kgotlas} to legitimate authority of their leaders and get their voices heard.\textsuperscript{14}

A major contribution of these studies is that citizens can appeal to a leader’s reputation, invoking shame or honor to get a politician to do his or her job. These insights are starting to be incorporated into theories of electoral accountability. For example, Eric Kramon finds that Kenyan politicians provide constituency service through vote buying, which can build credibility with voters.\textsuperscript{15} But this approach narrows in on the instrumental exchange of goods for votes, without considering the social and cultural meaning of constituency service.

This article suggests that these social practices are especially important in African democracies because they often provide the only means to pressure representatives to do their jobs and account for their actions. They underlie the process through which respect and admiration between constituents and representatives is achieved. Importantly, these daily practices often have an underlying logic of respect, morality, and obligation between citizens and their representatives.\textsuperscript{16} Despite this new scholarship that finds reputational effects to be a key feature of political accountability, the mechanisms under which these work \textit{outside the context of electoral campaigns} remain under-theorized and unincorporated into broader theories of democracy. This paper tries to fill this gap by theorizing the logic through which social status
and reputation can become central features of democratic accountability. To do so, I introduce a set of necessary conditions under which the logic of respect can help make accountability “work.” I suggest that this logic of respect provides an alternative to electoral sanctioning and popular control that dominate conventional models of political accountability.

Collectively, I label the set of conditions *dignified public expression*. First, a dynamic process of talking and listening emerges between constituents and representatives. Second, bonds of respect develop between leaders and their followers. Third, citizens come together to set the policymaking agenda at spheres of democratic expression, and these ideas are taken into account by policymakers. Therefore, accountability is operationalized as a process of political decision-making where citizens generate ideas that are then taken into account by their representatives, and these interests are acted on or turned into law.\(^\text{17}\) By shifting the focus of accountability from removal to respect, this article provides an explanation for how citizens might make accountability work, situating the process in the social and cultural context of daily life.

**Research design**

I draw on evidence from urban Ghana to substantiate the theory. Conducting research in urban Ghana provides a good opportunity to assess the different ways that citizens pressure representatives to do their jobs in a young democracy. Ghana has had a vibrant two-party system dating to the early 1950s and varying successes with elections and multi-party politics. Yet the emergence of a relatively robust electoral democracy coincides with a weak rule of law and poor transparency, providing a puzzling case for the examination of accountability. By focusing on the single case, I therefore attempt to generate theory and hypotheses to inform future research.\(^\text{18}\)

I use ethnography, or “immersion in the lives of the people under study.”\(^\text{19}\) I did so in the context of daily life by visiting at least one of three communities every day over the course of
twelve months. By interacting with community leaders on a daily basis, I gained crucial insights into their motivations and incentives. In addition, I conducted 26 focus groups with 102 citizens and leaders in order to collect data through group interaction. Focus groups have been used to study public opinion in American politics, as well as studies of local African politics. The groups focused particularly on politics and attempted to uncover the meaning of political accountability in the daily lives of urban Ghanaian residents.

I analyzed the content of these focus groups using an inductive, pre-coding strategy that identified a set of frames and the symbols and argument structures that illustrate them. Frames are different ways of organizing or perceiving reality. I use discourse analysis to examine how “the socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created and are held in place.” In contrast to content analysis that takes concepts as fixed and attempts to code them for quantitative analysis, I place the concepts in their social context in order to uncover the meanings by which individuals make sense of their daily realities. Therefore, the number of times an individual says a particular word is not as important as the frames through which individuals make sense of their political realities. I then put these social practices and meanings in dialogue with Western political thought to inductively generate a logic of democratic accountability based on respect, and that can generalize beyond the context of urban Ghana.

The empirical material discussed in this paper focuses on local leaders like assemblypersons and traditional authorities, as well as social practices that take place in the daily settings of Ghanaian neighborhoods. But there is preliminary evidence that this logic of accountability can extend across Africa, and influences different levels of political analysis including regional- and national-level politics. This is because the cultural practices that underlie democratic politics in Africa—e.g. the language and imagery of family and parenthood that
Michael Schatzberg calls the moral matrix of legitimate governance—extend across “middle Africa.” These cultural expectations are evident across levels of government.

Secondly, *Afrobarometer* data suggest that Africans engage in the daily political practices that I observe. For example, ordinary Africans contact leaders “about some important problem or to give them your views” at high rates. While respondents indicate contacting their local representatives more than MPs, they emphasize the desire to contact leaders in higher positions of government if it were possible. Finally, citizens express a willingness to join others in demanding accountability from their government representatives. This evidence suggests that the scope conditions for dignified public expression extend at least as wide as middle Africa, and perhaps much further across the continent.

**Rethinking the logic of accountability as dignified public expression**

There are two major theoretical frameworks for the study of political accountability: electoral accountability and popular control. Both rely on the logic of removal, that is, the threat that constituents can remove the representative from political office if he or she fails to account for one’s actions. Studies of electoral accountability draw from Hanna Pitkin’s early critique of the authorization view of representation—that a representative has been authorized to act on behalf of the represented. The problem with this view, according to Pitkin, is that it sets the representative relationship as a transaction that happens only before the actual representing begins. But, there are no formal institutional mechanisms in place to ensure that representatives adhere to the promises they made during their campaigns.

Scholars responded to this criticism and advanced a model by which elections serve to hold politicians accountable. It is called retrospective voting: politicians must satisfy some criteria—they must perform—or they will be voted out of office. This suggests that there must
be a mechanism in place for holding the representative to account for their decisions and if necessary for imposing sanctions, ultimately by removing the representative from power. The electoral accountability theory privileges retrospective control of authorized representatives through the threat of withdrawal of support during elections. Citizens have control over their representatives because they can sanction them by voting them out of office.\textsuperscript{32}

The element of institutional sanctioning appears to be the determining characteristic of accountability,\textsuperscript{33} distinguishing it from other concepts like responsiveness.\textsuperscript{34} Existing theories of electoral systems attempt to uncover the degree of control that voters have over their representatives, suggesting that this plays an important factor in the amount of accountability.\textsuperscript{35} Nonetheless, accountability as control models attempt to simplify a variety of complicated relationships and give divisible power to either the principal or the agent.

The rise of importance of accountability in our understanding of democracy has led to a strange paradox. On the one hand, accountability is now understood as a core element of democracy.\textsuperscript{36} This has mostly focused on strengthening elections,\textsuperscript{37} although there is a small literature developing on the role of watchdog agencies.\textsuperscript{38} Yet, on the other hand, there is significant “electoral skepticism”—empirical and theoretical research that shows that elections might not deliver accountability.\textsuperscript{39} Democratic elections are “highly imperfect” and possess “incomplete ability to discipline and select incumbents.”\textsuperscript{40}

It is for these reasons that scholars advance the second major approach to political accountability: deepening popular control over representatives.\textsuperscript{41} This approach argues that elections are embedded in a broader environment of agreement and disagreement, where the degree of electoral accountability depends on underlying norms—whether voters view elections as a mechanism of accountability in the first place.\textsuperscript{42} As a result, accountability ceases to be
limited to the moment of an election, but instead is found to be a characteristic of an ongoing relationship between representatives and constituents. Accountability and representation are not easily distinguishable by a particular moment or decision, and instead involve repetition and ongoing political practice and participation between elections.\textsuperscript{43} While these critiques go a long way toward our understanding of the limitations of elections as a mechanism of the principal-agent model of accountability, they still rely on a clear logic of removal that fails to capture the complexity and variety of relations among constituents and representatives.

This article presents a third framework for the study of democratic accountability that rests on respect, rather than electoral sanctioning and removal. A theory of dignified public expression extends Josiah Ober’s concept of democracy’s dignity.\textsuperscript{44} In his conceptualization of dignity, defined as equal high standing characterized by nonhumiliation (having respect as a moral equal) and noninfantilization (having recognition as a choicemaking adult), it is democracy’s third core value, in addition to liberty and equality. Dignity requires that every person deserves to be treated in a manner on par with the highest worth of humanity.\textsuperscript{45} It expresses the highest and equal status of all human beings.\textsuperscript{46} Citizens require dignity if they are to successfully govern themselves.\textsuperscript{47} On the one hand, this requires basic capabilities of human development.\textsuperscript{48} This is because dignity is required for people to put their political liberty to use and to improve institutions over time.\textsuperscript{49}

But it requires more, that “relevant information is made public.”\textsuperscript{50} In particular, it joins in existing attempts to reconcile theories of deliberation with those of representation.\textsuperscript{51} Central to these theories is a form of reciprocity, or fair terms of cooperation among equals.\textsuperscript{52} This involves a public sphere where individuals from diverse social standings discuss problems together.\textsuperscript{53} At a very basic level, this requires political equality, or the ability to express one’s views on equal
standing with others in a polity. But it also requires participatory parity, where all individuals have the political space to participate in discussions about justice. In the space of public deliberation, representatives and their constituents are on equal standing, and both engage in expression that involves “talking and listening.” It goes one step further than Waldron’s demand that constituents “owe an account” by requiring that leaders “give reasons that can be accepted by all those who are bound by laws and policies they justify.”

Dignified public expression contains three components. First, a crucial aspect of dignity in a democracy is that the other—another person, government, politician—listens. Dignified public expression exists only when there is speaking and listening. It is this active form of talking and listening, similar to what Nadia Urbinati terms advocacy representation that residents demand in their daily lives. Talking and listening ensures that those who are affected by decision-making are included and present in the public sphere: their presence is embodied.

These modes of interactive communication foster the second necessary component of dignified public expression: bonds of respect between representatives and constituents. Respect is more than an economic transaction, but instead involves deep admiration of another person. It involves political loyalty, or a deeply affective tie to a social group or individual. Bonds of respect require social recognition. The social and political claims that ordinary people make stem from anger and feelings of disrespect. The manner in which these claims are expressed and enforced through respectful modes of interactive communication provide the fabric for this logic of accountability. By incorporating the importance of social recognition, as well as the public sphere in political accountability, I move closer to the way that many individuals understand the concept. For many citizens, accountability is more than removing them from power; it involves daily interactions and deliberation with their leaders.
Third, citizens must come together to set the policymaking agenda at spheres of democratic expression. These “sites for the performance of citizenship,” as Wedeen calls them, generate the necessary information that can make political accountability possible.\(^{64}\) Citizens must be able to set the agenda for what they want legislated, ensuring that they are part of the process of local decision-making, not just public opinion formation.\(^{65}\) Information and transparency play critical roles in accountability by inviting the public to join the sphere of public expression. The information that brings people together, or that which instills the belief that other community members will join in and effect change, is the crucial ingredient.\(^{66}\) This information allows people to make claims to representation and accountability, through this collective endeavor.\(^{67}\) And it is this kind of information that is a valuable resource.

Sites of public expression might strengthen collective efficacy, or a group’s belief that they have the power to achieve goals through collective action.\(^{68}\) These sites provide one possible linkage mechanism of mutual trust that provides willingness of representatives to intervene for the common good—they provide the context for collective efficacy.\(^{69}\) While informal or formal rules and norms might not entirely change, new practices become “thinkable” as behavioral practices in their “cultural toolkit.”\(^{70}\) Sites of public expression provide the opportunity to strengthen bonds of respect between leaders and their followers, as well as overcome the necessary barriers needed to transform accumulated information into citizen accountability.\(^{71}\) In these ways, daily practices provide potential for citizens to set their own decision-making agenda.

Once citizens have expressed their ideas, they are then taken into account by policymakers, and leaders owe account of what they do with these ideas once in office. Representatives owe an account of what they are doing directly to the people.\(^{72}\) The decision-
making process requires information and transparency to be central tenets of dignified public expression. But, information and transparency on their own are insufficient: they must contribute to collective action. Dignified public expression fosters individual belief that collective action will make a difference, providing an important mechanism to translate information into action. In these ways, dignified public expression necessitates a central place in a theory of political accountability, as well as democratic theory more generally. Accountability is achieved when citizens’ ideas are directly taken into account by decision-makers, and representatives put into action or law these interests.

**Talking and listening**

I will now demonstrate how dignified public expression based on respect can underlie accountability in urban Ghana. In this case, the conditions of dignified public expression resonate with the social and cultural norms that govern Ghanaian society. In urban Ghana, residents substantiate Ober’s claim that freedom and equality are not sufficient elements of democracy: they must also be able to express themselves publicly, and this requires making claims to human dignity. This element is central to many Ghanaians’ understanding of democracy, and can be extended to accountability. As one respondent says: “[Democracy is] a simple way to express yourself. To express the grief that you have within you… We have to voice out.” In fact, the word “Democracy” in Akan-Twi, Ghana’s most widely spoken indigenous language is “Ka-bi-ma-menka-bi.” This translates to: I speak and then you speak. Many Ghanaians understand democracy as the process of free political expression, which reinforces understandings of mutual respect and dignity.

Speaking *and* listening are required conditions. In one focus group, a respondent suggests that democracy is working: “I will say democracy is working in this community because
everyone enjoys freedom, because if you are doing something that is wrong somebody will call you and talk to you, saying what you are doing is not good, so stop it. And we are also listening.\textsuperscript{76} The respondent mentions that “everyone enjoys freedom” because they have the ability to talk and express themselves. But perhaps more importantly, the respondent says “we are also listening” to the critique against them, that what they “are doing is not good.” There is a collective capacity to change “wrong” behavior; there is a sense of collective responsibility, manifesting itself in the practice of public expression that can move the community forward. It is this process of public expression that leads to collective learning that residents value.\textsuperscript{77}

Focus group data confirm that residents understand political accountability to be an active behavioral relationship between leaders and followers; a relationship of stewardship by which leaders must “owe an account” of their actions; and a public phenomenon. For example, one respondent emphasizes this active and deliberative process:

> Because democracy is people’s power, we must know the essence of the power so we can demand for accountability. It is a way of getting back to the people to let them know what you are using the power they have given you…When the problems are being tackled, our leader has to come back to tell the people the progress of action being taken …Meet the people and put into action whatever we have said.\textsuperscript{78}

The duty to engage in respectful modes of interactive communication and maintain social relations is emphasized as “a way of getting back to the people to let them know what you are using the power they have given you.” While there is a transfer of power—from the citizens to the representative, as the respondent indicates—this power is not given without expectation of physically (and personally) hearing back from the leader.\textsuperscript{79} As Waldron emphasizes, the leader needs to owe an account,\textsuperscript{80} as another respondent emphasizes:

> The [leader] needs to tell the people what he is doing with the power… Doing work according to your master’s order and if you do not do it well, it will bring about low productivity- so you have to deliberate on it so you can find solution to them… Once we have the [leader] given power to the people, at the end of the month the people will have to give account to the [leader].\textsuperscript{81}
The leader “needs to tell the people what he is doing with the power.” The leader has the responsibility to come back and account to his or her people, or “when the problems are being tackled, he has to come back to tell the people the progress of action being taken,” as the quote above suggests. But the process is reciprocal: constituents must also “give account to the president,” suggesting that accountability is collective and involves responsibilities and obligations by both parties.

Political accountability is also a relationship of stewardship. Leaders are not just given a mandate to represent his or her constituents; they are given the responsibility to be stewards over the resources of the entire country, or community for local positions. The political unit is now “a trust under his care,” as a respondent suggests:

Asking someone to account for a trust under his care. Do you think it is good ‘accountability’ if someone likes you and gives you a job, after he returns you should give him account of what transpired in his absence in order for respect to be between us. So that in the future he can put his business into your care without any tears. 82

Another respondent makes a similar claim: “You have been entrusted with a job; you need to render a report on the progress of the job – the shortfalls and the success… Leaders who have been given a job to do giving account of work done… Telling the people what you are using our natural resources for.” 83 Here, leaders have been entrusted to use “our national resources,” with “our” meaning the constituents who voted the leader into power. This act of stewardship is the act of being “entrusted with a job.” How the leader acts has important implications for not only the leader, but the followers or constituents as well. The actions of the leader will even affect future decision-making, the above respondent suggests that “the future he can put his business into your care without any tears.” In this way, political accountability extends far beyond the mandate view and the formal accountability model—accountability is not simply about sanctioning the leader out of office. Political accountability also entails overall admiration in
leadership, and the future ability to get things done. The bonds of respect between the leaders and their followers must be strong for the effective, future management of resources.

Finally, political accountability requires that it is a public phenomenon. Respondents mention that leaders should “meet the people” and residents should be able to physically “see the details of your [leader’s] activities.” One respondent suggests that the process of making actions aware is a public process that must be done in front of the constituents: “Accountability means people should be made aware of how a common resource is being managed. It means people should be able to see the details of your activities.”84 This gets at the heart of the respondent claim above that “democracy is people’s power” and that they must “know the essence of the power” so that they can hold their leaders accountable. The way citizens “know the essence of the power” is by the public announcement of the governing activities of their leaders. The public spectacle of talking and listening enforces the collective nature of decision-making, a key element of the practice of accountability.

**Bonds of respect**

In 2012, a Ghanaian neighborhood held a governance forum to discuss security and other public service projects. Traditional leaders, local government representatives, journalists, and police officers attended the event. Early in the discussion, a community organizer who served as the moderator introduced a leader of the area and called him forward to address his constituents. The organizer looked the leader directly in the eye and said, “You must tell us something today. Why are you not engaging the community?” Put on the spot, and demanded to account for his actions, the leader responded to the allegation that the residents don’t see him around. He explained his record and emphasized what he has done for the community. He ended his
response by saying that if people felt the way the organizer felt, “Then I am sorry. But I beg to differ.”

After the event, the leader went up to the organizer and said, “I never liked you before. But I like you now.” Prior to the forum, the leader greatly distrusted the organizer. But the forum demonstrated that the organizer simply wanted to hold the leader accountable for his actions. But, even more importantly, he gave the leader the chance to defend his actions publicly and explain how he does his job. The forum provided the necessary space for the leader to educate his constituents about the role of governing, the organizer the space to seek answers from his leader, and the collective public space to build bonds of respect between leaders and followers.

It is very difficult to disaggregate the concepts of trust, accountability, and transparency. For example, one focus group participant explains, “The behavior of some of the leaders of the community gives us reasons not to trust them. We don’t trust them because they are not transparent.” Many Ghanaians trust their leaders if the leaders can account for their actions; the provision of resources is transparent; and the leaders can explain to them the decision-making process. It is this third component of trust that is often overlooked in conventional models of trust: residents must publicly share in the experience of the process in order for them to gain trust in their leaders. In other words, leaders can do their jobs and act in a transparent manner, but if residents are not publicly engaged in this process, respect will not be generated. One respondent describes this sentiment:

The reason we trust our leaders is that when we meet and give them money, they take it to the bank and come and show us the pay in slip, so we are sure our money is in the bank, and whatever we tell them to they follow…they explain everything to us well.

The respondent highlights that the leaders are open and transparent, but perhaps just as importantly, “they explain everything to us well.” Failure to explain the process leads community members to believe that their leaders think they are better than them, have “forgotten
them,” or are no longer part of the community—the bonds of respect are not strong. But trust is generated by leaders’ ability to bring residents into the decision-making process and collectively moving forward together, contributing to mutual respect that drives cooperative behavior.

In contrast to conventional models that emphasize logics of removal, the practice of accountability in urban Ghana rests on a relational norm of respect about how leaders should interact with his or her followers, and how citizens should in turn treat their representatives. As one respondent explains: “If you don’t respect them [the leaders] how can you expect them to help you.” Another: “Because you selected him to be your leader so you have to support him to do the work, and respect is a way of supporting them.” A third: “Yes, respect is very good. Even if the leader is a small person we need to respect him.” Ordinary residents and citizens are obligated to respect their leaders; otherwise, they will not be able to demand accountability. In other words, leaders are not expected to perform their duties in office unless they are respected.

In contrast to authorization views of representation, leaders are not given a mandate to perform solely by being voted into office—once in their position the populace must also respect them.

Michael Schatzberg argues that this norm of respect is based on a particular type of power unique to middle Africa, where leaders are expected to act like parents and feed their followers—real or metaphorical. Consumption demonstrates status and prestige. Jean and John L. Comaroff locate the roots of this norm of respect in pre-colonial, traditional leadership forms, like chieftaincy institutions. Here, they explain: “Chiefs were expected to rule ‘with’ the people… What this meant, in practice, is that sovereigns were expected to surround themselves with advisors to guide the everyday life of the polity… delivering improvements, in turn, hinged on the public cooperation that a ruler could command.” The daily behavior of chiefs was crucial to governance, and rested on this norm of respect.
But it is important to emphasize that respect is not solely given or earned in a transaction—or by winning an election. Admiration must be earned. For leaders to earn the respect of their constituents, they must also respect them. My data substantiate these claims, as one resident explains: “When the leader does not respect people, he would also not be respected. Leaders who are performing their duties are respected; if you don’t perform people will not care about you.”

Another describes how the names that citizens attach to their representatives invoke respect: “Yes, we call them Honourables. But if they do not respect us we will also not respect them.” The bonds of respect between leaders and their followers are broken when citizens’ ideas are not taken into account and law is not enacted based on these desires.

There is a historical precedent of popular control over chiefs in African societies—groups can always depose their chief and sanction him out of office. The cultural and traditional norm of sanctioning the chief out of power has been used as an argument that democracy can build off this precedent of popular rule. While paying close attention to the cultural underpinnings of Ghanaian society, the logic of dignified public expression does not require communitarian ideals, and even rejects it in many cases. While the one-shot sanctioning by the populace in cases of deposing chiefs is consistent with the logic of removal, it is not delivering what many Ghanaians understand to be accountability. The representative is not giving account of his actions, the populace has not been able to set the agenda, and it is not demanding the representative do his job. The bonds of respect between the leader and followers are broken.

Reducing respect to a sanctioning mechanism undermines the emotional attachment between leaders and followers that is so important to self-fulfillment. One respondent explains this in the Ghanaian context:

They [our leaders] are not honest, their biggest problem is power, they don’t want to give recognition to others because those people are ‘no bodies,’ that is the problem with them.
‘He is nobody’ is their biggest problem, and in leadership if you don’t give due recognition to your people, they will not also give you any recognition. Here, the respondent clearly suggests that the problem of leadership in his community is that the leaders do not treat them as persons—they are “no bodies.” By undermining a person’s humanity—by not recognizing him or her as a person—the leader damages the relationship of respect. This act of disrespect makes it impossible to pursue developmental priorities for the community: there is no norm of respect on which to cooperate publicly. A lack of respect filters down to the community, creating a deadlock for community cooperation.

The lack of respect has serious implications for development and community cohesion. As one respondent explains, “Old man, honestly, the leaders do not respect us—they do not respect anyone. They are only concerned about what they will eat…Nobody wants to take up the responsibility.” Here, the respondent touches on a lack of legitimacy: he lacks legitimacy because he does not care for his followers. It also demonstrates how electoral accountability is nonexistent. In some cases, this leads to a cycle of disrespect: “One man among us I can call my father he respects me and I can do the same with him.” In these cases, a deficit of respect hinders community cooperation, undermining the development prospects of a constituency.

**Spheres of democratic expression**

In places where formal institutions are weak, citizens need an alternative way to elections to influence their leaders. Political accountability often requires physical spaces where people come together to engage in collective decision-making, or spheres of democratic expression. In this context, accountability becomes a give-and-take process whereby residents publicly express their concerns and leaders actively listen to the claims made. Then they come to an agreement together. In my focus groups, I asked a series of questions about the provision of contracts for public service projects. In this question, I asked the group what they would do if
they heard that one of their political party leaders was given a contract but was not getting the work done. One man responded:

We will allow him to express his view. He will tell me why the work is not done. I will go to him and find out from him whether it is true that he was given a contract, then if he confirms, then I will ask him why it was not done, then from his explanation, I will know the next step to take. If he does not come to the community how do I ask him?103

A number of points are notable in this exchange. First, the respondent mentions that he will “go to him and find out from him whether it is true.” He is clear that he will “allow him to express his view.” In this way, the leader must be accessible so that residents can go talk to them. The respondent expects to be able to have a conversation with his leader so that he can express his concerns about the community. The participant explains that “from his explanation, I will know the next step to take.” This was an extremely common response throughout the interviews: respondents suggest that they can tell if the leader is truthful and genuine after the process of public expression. Second, the resident emphasizes the importance of public accessibility—leaders must be visible in their community so that residents can begin the process of accountability. The final step is the process of public exposure.

Accountability is a political process, and like representation, the “effects of a practice” that is reiterated in the behaviors of daily life.104 Without formal accountability mechanisms in place, residents find creative ways to hold their leaders to account. Rather than attempt to sanction or remove their leaders, they attempt to strengthen the bonds of respect between them—they do this through the threat of public shame and the prospect of public honor. As one respondent explains in response to a question about the ethnic chauvinism of a leader:

I will tell him what he is doing is not right, and demand that he does the right thing. We will call him and tell him that by doing that it tarnishes the image of Dagombas, so he should stop. We can also call for executive meeting to sit him down and talk to him because that can also affect the party’s popularity.105
Here, the respondent mentions that the appropriate way to fight tribalism—a threat to democratic accountability—is to make it public. By doing so, he “tarnishes the image of the Dagombas,” a serious and shameful offense. In another interview, the respondent emphasizes the importance of public expression, making eye contact with the leader, and frequent visits:

“If there is something to be done I go to them to find out how they are planning to do it, and the answers they give me tells me they do the work we give them. If you give a position to somebody and you go to sleep, if he fails you, you share the blame. What I think we can do is, they come to us for advice, to see our condition, they ask us what the problem is if we don’t go to work, also they come and sit down and get time to chat.”

The respondent mentions a sense of collective responsibility—“if he fails you, you share the blame.” Another respondent mentions that he will do all that he can do disgrace the leader—he will shame him into action by his public actions: “I will ask him, when I do it may lead to a quarrel so everybody will hear it. We will make some noise for people to hear of it.” By “making noise,” residents hope that others will join in the process and they can get something done: “Because there is no trust, I will tackle him or her alone. I will make noise for people to join me to collect the money.” The activity of public shame is not simply to remove the leader, but rather to invite others into the process as a collective endeavor. The moral disrespect and collective sense of injustice can be used positively as a source of power to shame leaders into action. The challenge is to translate feelings of collective subordination into the public transcript, and this is often done in spheres of democratic expression.

The importance of respect and the expectations that representatives publicly account for their actions in front of constituents is apparent in Ghanaians’ assessment of good and bad leadership. Democratic accountability requires that the leaders owe the people an account of what they have been doing. Residents expect their leaders to do more than deliver the goods; they also expect them to listen to their ideas and hear their voices. Accountability is about more than serving the original mandate or the representative’s ability to perform in government to
avoid sanctioning. Rather, leaders are expected to have a personal connection with their constituents—a connection that strengthens the bonds of respect. The failure of leaders to engage their constituents in the public sphere engenders deep resentment and disrespect.

Consider the following assessments of good leadership:

A good [leader] is one that listens to the people when they call on him, one that calls the people to meetings to discuss ways to improve...one who listens to your plight anytime you call on him even at night, one that will come to your community and when you call him, take your concerns and present them at the assembly, so as to make sure all your problems are solved.\(^\text{111}\)

Another respondent mentions the importance of intervening in community affairs: “We have good leaders whom when they intervene in a dispute, there is peace due to their wisdom.”\(^\text{112}\)

Another resident stresses that the leaders are accessible: “I think there are good leaders, if you bring a complaint, they work on it so they are good leaders.”\(^\text{113}\)

Leaders are also expected to reflect the community sensibility, as one resident makes clear about what he sees as good leadership: “One that shares the cry of the community and the joy of the community. One that understands the problems of the community. A good [leader] is one who stays in the community and makes sure the community is clean.”\(^\text{114}\)

The final respondent emphasizes creating a public space for citizen-leader engagement, or a place for the leader to learn about the problems facing the community members: “He should be able to sit with us and know our problems. He should be able to settle people’s problems when they approach him. He should work on our complaints.”\(^\text{115}\)

All of these responses indicate that leaders must take the ideas of their constituents into account. The leader’s failure to engage in the respectful modes of interactive communication renders him less able to address important material needs. The failure to address material needs is compounded by the implication that he was not listening. The respondent emphasizes a direct link between the complaints of the residents and the ability of the leader “to take these ideas into account,” and work on them.
In this way, the process of political accountability depends on a public sphere where the leaders interact with his or her followers. In these conversations, residents mention the importance of “listening to the people,” “calling people to meetings,” “coming to your community when you call him,” “taking your concerns and presenting them at the assembly,” “managing human relations,” “being easily approachable,” and “staying in the community and makes sure the community is clean.” All of these necessary conditions of good leadership suggest the importance of creating a space for public dialogue and deliberation.

**Beyond elections and removal**

Admittedly, a logic of dignified public expression does not overlook the fact that removal and popular control are important in Ghanaian politics. Respondents do go to the ballot box and vote their leaders out of office, as the theory of electoral accountability implies. One respondent explains: “We give them power through voting…If we give power to someone and he does not perform, after his tenure we can vote him out.” Another, “[When] we realized there was a problem, fortunately it was time for election, so we voted him out.” But while urban Ghanaians clearly know the rules, and understand that this is a theoretical possibility, there is far more evidence to suggest that voting serves as a selection rather than an accountability mechanism. As one respondent suggests: “We give them power through voting.” Then immediately after elections, “they start showing their real attitude.” Most of the evidence suggests that voting simply formalizes a relationship that already exists: “We voted for them and that shows we trust them.”

Another possibility is that checks and balances are required to control politicians. Residents admit that representation at the local level can assist with checking powerful leaders. For example, one respondent explains how ethnic groups need representation, “If the leadership
is made up of one tribe, they can be doing their own things but if all the tribes are included they can be checking each other.”¹²¹ That said, the checks do not seem to be working, and transparency is lacking. As one resident explains the problems with local leadership: “We realized that when they receive money instead of being transparent, one person sits on the money.”¹²² My data suggests that rather than being a technocratic or legal endeavor, transparency is often the outcome of a collective endeavor where residents come together to publicly hold leaders to account by shaming them, as I document in earlier sections. Ghanaians have to practice accountability in the ways outlined in this article to foster transparent leaders.

**Toward an alternative logic of political accountability**

This article suggests that theories of political accountability that focus solely on elections or other forms of removal are limited, especially in young African democracies. These models do not include the way that people often practice accountability, which rest on the logic of representatives engaging in dignified public expression with their constituents. Elections might only serve as a selection mechanism, not one that delivers accountability.¹²³ But this article demonstrates how the everyday practice of accountability, through dignified public expression between leaders and residents in face-to-face situations, better reflects how Ghanaians understand the concept of accountability as a public, relational, and action-oriented process.¹²⁴

The article has important theoretical and empirical implications. First, theoretically, it combines principles of political representation with those of deliberative democracy. Habermas’ theory of the public sphere produced a strong basis for how public opinion impacts governing officials, while Fraser forcefully argues for a “strong public” that includes the ability to create and make decisions.¹²⁵ Further, deliberation must translate into policy.¹²⁶ I contribute to these theories by demonstrating the importance of spheres of democratic expression in the context of
daily life, thereby generating and maintaining bonds of respect between representatives and constituents. These behaviors are institutionalized in the daily practices of dignified public expression between representatives and citizens.

Second, the study provides empirical evidence to show how citizens actually hold their leaders to account in urban Ghana. The practice of democratic accountability takes place in the context of daily life—between elections and outside of legislatures and formal assemblies. In this way, I make a methodological contribution: studies of politics and the building of democratic theory should consider the voices of ordinary people and should inform theory building, be used to generate new hypotheses, and question what the political is expected to reasonably include. Surprisingly, this article finds that the voices of ordinary Ghanaians in the poorest urban neighborhoods hold consistent attitudes with ideas of Western political philosophy, particularly with elements of deliberative democracy and political representation. The article answers the call for an engaged comparative political theory, one that places the voices and opinions from non-Western sources in conversation with Western political theory.127

Third, the article suggests that the ways political scientists have been operationalizing elements of accountability might not be measuring the practice at all. The article highlights the need for empirical measures that extend far beyond voting behavior and access to information. The next step is to develop public opinion surveys and citizen questionnaires that capture the logic of dignified public expression. More research is also needed on what conditions enable the growth of dignified public expression, and what political forces prevent it from emerging.

Fourth, dignified public expression considers the social and cultural norms that govern society. Pre-colonial patterns of authority and traditional institutions have been found to have a significant impact on contemporary political outcomes like public goods provision in Senegal
and Zambia. In addition, leaders have been found to legitimate their authority by subscribing to cultural norms in rural Ghana and Nigeria. In this way, I’d expect these patterns of politics to generalize to emerging African democracies.

Fifth, face-to-face individual communication is not relevant to all contexts, due to the scale of operations and cultural differences. But the values that face-to-face interactive modes of communication harbor are theoretically generalizable: they strengthen the bonds of respect between representative and constituent. This element of respectful modes of interactive communication can be bolstered in different ways in diverse contexts, for example by using the media to create channels of communication that would give constituents this sense of respect. While the logic of dignified public expression holds most of its explanatory power in young African democracies, the implications extend across the world. Strengthening bonds of respect bolsters accountability, providing a necessary characteristic of democratic self-government.


This behavior signals knowledge, expertise, and competence; perceptions of shared interests and trustworthiness, and; electoral viability. Eric Kramon, “Electoral Handouts as Information: Explaining Unmonitored Vote Buying,” World Politics, 68 (July 2016), 454-498.


This is the definition of accountability provided by Julia Paley, “Accountable democracy: Citizens’ impact on public decision making in postdictatorship Chile,” American Ethnologist, 31 (November 2004), 497-513.

Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences (Boston: MIT Press, 2005).


David L. Morgan, Focus Groups as Qualitative Research (New York: Sage Publications, 1997).


Detailed information about the focus group respondents, interview questions, and sampling procedure are included in the Supplemental Information.


Schatzberg 2001. The eight countries in Schatzberg’s analysis include Senegal, Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania and Congo.

In round 7 (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Benin, Cote d’Ivoire, Malawi, Zambia, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, Zimbabwe), 22.8% contacted local government representative; 11.1% contacted MP; 14.6% contacted official of a government agency; 52.3% contacted religious leader; 32.5% contacted traditional leader. 61.1% of people answered that while they have not contacted a “government official to ask for help or make a complaint,” they would if they had the chance.

66.1% of respondents indicate having attended a community meeting. 26.4% indicate that they have joined others to request governmental action (with an additional 55% indicating that they would so do if given the chance).


32 Ferejohn 1986.


40 Besley 2006: 196.
30

41 Maloy 2014.


49 Ober 2012.

50 Ober 2012: 827.


52 Gutmann and Thompson 1996.


57 Gutmann and Thompson 1996: 129.

58 Urbinati 2000.


60 The term “bonds of respect” is used in Braithwaite’s (1989) influential theory of reintegrative justice where he emphasizes the power of shaming and the importance of social cohesion; John Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).


65 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26, (1990), 56-80.


71 Lieberman et al. 2014.

72 Waldron 2014.


75 May 18, 2012. What does democracy mean to you?

76 June 3, 2012. What does democracy mean to you?

77 Schaffer 1998 makes a similar argument by demonstrating that democracy in Senegal, and electoral institutions in particular, are a means to reinforce community ties that may be called upon in times of crisis.

78 May 18, 2012. What does accountability mean to you?

80 Waldron 2009.

81 June 14, 2012. What does accountability mean to you?

82 June 12, 2012. What does accountability mean to you?


84 June 22, 2012. What is accountability?

85 June 4, 2012. Do you trust your leaders? Why or why not?

86 June 9, 2012. Do you trust your leaders?

87 June 20, 2012. Should citizens show more respect for authority?

88 June 4, 2012.

89 June 28, 2012.


93 June 28, 2012. Should citizens show more respect for authority?

94 June 14, 2012.

95 Paley 2004.


97 Honneth 2003.
May 19, 2012. What is the biggest problem with your leaders?

May 14, 2012. What is the state of streetlights in your community?


June 22, 2012. Do you have father figures in the community?

Wedeen 2008.

May 27, 2012. A contract has been awarded to the NDC Constituency Chairman to build gutters. For the next year, no work is done. You hear rumors that he has sold the contract but you are not sure. Is there anything you can do to make sure that the work gets done?


June 3, 2012. A contract has been awarded to a branch executive with the intention of providing work for a group of 20 youth across different tribes. He gives the work to his own family members, all from the same tribe. Does this seem fair to you?

June 9, 2012. How do you hold your leaders accountable?

June 9, 2012. A contract has been awarded to a branch executive with the intention of providing work for a group of 20 youth across different tribes. He gives the work to his own family members, all from the same tribe. Does this seem fair to you? Is there anything you can do to make sure he divides the work to others? What will you do?

May 18, 2012. You hear a rumor that your Assemblyman has “chopped” the money that is meant to be used for tarring the roads in your community. What will you do?


Waldron 2014.
June 9, 2012. What makes a good assemblyman?

June 28, 2012. Who do you see as the “father” of the community? Provide examples.

June 4, 2012. Are there good leaders in the community?

June 4, 2012. What makes a good assemblyman?

June 22, 2012. Who can you call a good assemblyman?

For a longer discussion and evidence of alternative explanations, see Supplemental Information.

June 3, 2012. From where do leaders gain their power?

May 5, 2012.

June 20, 2012.

June 28, 2012. Do you trust your leaders? Why or why not?

May 27, 2012. Do you think that it is good for the leadership of the community to include all tribal groups?

July 9, 2012.

Fearon 1999; Maloy 2014.

Saward 2006.

Fraser 1990.


Andrew March, “What is Comparative Political Theory?” The Review of Politics, 71 (Fall 2009), 531-565.
